

# On Being Your True Self

by Piya Tan

## We are a “bundle” of selves

In our every day life, very often we are but a “bundle” of selves – and often they conflict, fighting for our attention. One self decides to get up early in the morning, but what happens? When morning comes, another self has taken over. . This self has now taken over and *he* does not want to get up.

We all know that from time to time we are subjected to what are called “**moods.**” For example, we may feel depressed, or angry, or restless. The moods take possession of us and we do not know why we are simply “not ourselves.” And to the extent that a mood persists, we feel as though we are someone else.

If we then analyze ourselves, we will discover that we are not so much a unified self but really a sequence of selves – a “bundle” of minds like a cable of wires – transmitting messages all at the same time.

## No unchanging, permanent Self

We are not a single unified, completely integrated, self. We are actually, each of us, a collection of selves, each of which is fighting for supremacy. This explains why we so often fail to do something we have set out to do.

Another way of looking at this situation is that we are experiencing an ever-changing process without any unchanging, permanent self or soul. We are but a “bundle” of selves, fickle, uncertain, yet stubborn, conceited, and often in conflict with one another.

It is as if we were a bundle of selves loosely tied together by the thin string of personality with a label bearing our name and address. Yet all these selves are ever-changing.

## Getting “on the level” with ourselves

In order to harmonize our various conflicting “selves,” we should learn to know ourselves better. This is done through the practice of **mindfulness**, of which there are four aspects:

- the mindfulness of oneself,
- the mindfulness of others,
- the mindfulness of the environment, and
- the mindfulness of the truth.

The mindfulness of oneself is best cultivated through the practice of meditation. A meditation like **the mindfulness of the breath** helps us to be calmer and more aware of ourselves.

When we reach a state of mental calm in this way, we are said to have reached “horizontal integration” – we are “on the level” with ourselves.

## “Vertical integration”

As we become more and more of **true self**: we get a clearer understanding and experience of other people and our environment. We begin to tap our untapped energies and realize greater potentiality.

Our consciousness becomes more and more developed. This is called “vertical integration,” that is, the integration of our conscious mind with our “higher mind.”

As our consciousness becomes more and more developed, our experience of things begins to deepen and the horizon of our

thoughts begins to widen. People and things around us no more delude us, but appear as they really are. No more do we see merely the surface of things, but we begin to “see through” them.

## Causes and effects

One of the things that we learn with our developed mind is a very simple but important principle. We see that actions have results which in turn become causes producing more results. One action leads to another, and our lives are but a series of actions and results of causes and effects.

Very rarely, are we aware of the potentials and consequences of our thoughts and actions. We do things without thinking and often act on the spur of the moment. We do not realize that what we are doing will have consequences for our own selves and for others.

We are responsible for what we do: our every action has a reaction. Very often, we do not realize this. If we act responsibly, that is, mindfully, then we have understood the “law of karma”: that our actions have results, either good or evil, upon ourselves and others.

## Leaving the Group

When we understand and accept **karma** or personal accountability, we are determined to refine our speech, actions and thoughts. We are able to cultivate what is good and avoid what is bad. Our actions become more inspiring and our emotions more positive. We begin to truly think for ourselves.

We, in some way, become truly *free* from the conditioning of the group. We begin life with a group (the family); and as we grow older we join more groups (our school, the football team, the office group,

the political party, a religious group, a cult, and so on).

**But as we become more spiritually developed, the more we become free from the group.** We are able to really think for ourselves.

The mature person does not require the approval of the group for his peace of mind. The Buddha’s life-story is a very moving example of this. For six long years, he practised painful austerities. He did not wash. He cut down on food and sleep. He had no sex whatsoever. His body became so frail and thought that he was on the brink of death.

Realizing that self-mortification is not the way to awakening, the Buddha gave it all up. He started taking care of his body and ate proper food.

His five disciples, thinking that he had given up his spiritual resolution, deserted him in disgust.

The Buddha had left the family, his tribe, his friends, but in the end even his disciples deserted him. He was entirely on his own.

This means that a mature person has to be quite prepared, if necessary, to stand by himself, to disagree with the group. Only then could he be said to have become a **true individual**. He is emotionally independent, and has found his “true self.”

## Being Aware of Being Aware

A true individual is one who has discovered his true self. He is one who has developed his mindfulness to a high degree.

In other words, he has clear self-awareness or self-knowledge. This knowledge has to be distinguished from ordinary consciousness, that is, the animal-like consciousness of the physical senses and the low mind.

This ordinary sense-consciousness is the mindfulness of sensations and feelings arising from the sense-organs as a result of stimuli from the external world.

**Self-consciousness**, on the other hand, is like a clear mirror. We do not merely know or recognize things: we know that we know; we are aware that we are aware.

This sort of reflexive consciousness is distinctively a human faculty (as far as we know, no animal possesses it). It is this self-consciousness which distinguishes the human from the animal.

### The lower evolution

Man is a highly evolved being. *Biologically*, we have evolved from lower, simpler forms of life. *Anthropologically*, we have emerged from savagery and barbarism to culture and civilization. And we have *psychologically* developed from simple consciousness to self-consciousness.

This whole process of human evolution – biological, anthropological and psychological – has taken many millions of years, and together they constitute what is known as the lower evolution of consciousness.

While the lower evolution of man is *collective* (the whole species advancing as one man), the subsequent **higher evolution** is mainly, if not exclusively, psychological and spiritual.

The turning-point between the two is *self-consciousness* which represents the culmination of the lower evolution and the beginning of the higher evolution.

### The higher evolution

Self-awareness is evidently of crucial importance to our personal development. But this self-awareness or self-consciousness still needs to be perfected.

We have to go beyond this self-consciousness into the beginnings of “higher consciousness” – the awareness of a higher spiritual reality which embraces both oneself and the whole of conditioned existence.

This is the realization that all things are mind-made and as such are impermanent and unsatisfactory.

Eventually we have to pass from higher consciousness into “total consciousness,” where we realize the insubstantiality (not-self nature or “voidness”) and the oneness of all life and existence.

We then no more see things as a duality, as subject and object. We experience them as an integrated whole. We are then at peace with everything around us and with ourselves. We have reached the end of the higher evolution: that of the mind.

### The difficulty of being human

Nature carries us a long way up to the very limits of the lower evolution. At that point, she endows us with the rudiments of self-consciousness.

Then Nature leaves us to be on our own. From then on we have to progress with our individual conscious effort.

But we do not have to make this effort: we are free to choose whether or not to evolve further. In the Dhammapada, the Buddha says:

*Difficult it is to be a human being;  
Mortal life is a difficult thing;  
Difficult it is to hear the Sublime Truth;  
Difficult is the arising of Buddhas.*

(Dh 182)

We might paraphrase the first line as meaning that it is difficult to be truly human. We are rarely “human” in our daily lives. Very often we fall into sub-human levels and wallow there.

We fall into the lower of the six realms, one after another. We fall into the animal kingdom, the fierce asura demon world, the insatiable preta realm, or the suffering states.

In our sensual desires, we become animals; our ruthless ambitions make demons of us; our dissatisfactions turn us into pretas; and more often than not we suffer hellish pains of body and mind. This is called samsara or cyclic existence.

### Development of the true individual

In “cyclic” existence, it is difficult to become human. The rat-race turns each of us into a mere social unit, or at best, a “statistical individual.” Such a person is simply a member of a group, who, in fact, has no real existence apart from the group. As such, he has no true individuality.

Such a person often needs the approval of the group. He follows the ways and values of the group to which he or she belongs. As such, a statistical individual has a very low level of self-awareness, and is emotionally dependent on others.

To get out of this unthinking rut of the crowd, we must have the desire to develop ourselves. It is a decision to evolve. Then, we must take the necessary steps for our personal growth.

Sometimes, it appears to be such a heavy responsibility so that we are tempted to try to hand it over to someone else, maybe to a “God,” or some fashionable Oriental or Western guru-figure, or some political leader, or some successful person, in the hope that he will arrange everything for us with as little trouble as possible.

### The true self

Once in a while, a voice at the back of our minds, reminds us how far down the ladder of higher evolution we are. More often than not we prefer to disregard that

voice. We try our best to forget the whole bothersome question of personal development. We ask ourselves, “Why bother with all this task, all this effort? Why not be just an ordinary human being?”

Fortunately, once we have reached a certain point – once we have really started to think and to feel – we simply cannot put the whole question aside.

Personal growth is the natural course of life, and this applies to both the lower and the higher evolution. As living beings, we want to grow and to develop – because what every living thing wants to do most of all, is to fulfill the law of its own being – that we should develop and actualize our own deepest potential.

If we are prevented from evolving, whether by others or by our own selves, then inevitably we suffer, because we are going against the law of our being. We have therefore to co-operate with this natural law, which means that we have to evolve as true individuals: to become what we really are, to be our true self.

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